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SUBJECT: WORLD BEKTASHI LEADER INVITED TO TURKEY:
RECONCILIATION AFTER 85 YEARS?

¶1. (SBU) On June 12, Bulent Arinc, head of the Turkish parliament, visited the world headquarters of Bektashism in Tirana, Albania. Arinc invited Reshat Bardhi, head of the World Bektashi Community, to come to Turkey to participate in a Bektashi feast August 16. This would be the first official contact between Turkey and the particularly liberal Bektashi sect of Shia Islam since it was driven out of Turkey 85 years ago. According to Rasim Hasanaj, Head of the Albanian Cults Committee, this overture was a step towards reconciliation with Bektashism and was aimed at sending a political message to the European Union that Turkey supported religious tolerance.

¶2. (SBU) Ilir Dedej, Director of Foreign Relations of the Bektashi Community, said that relations between the Turkish government and the Bektashi Community began to improve last year with the appointment of Suphan Erkula, the current Turkish ambassador to Albania. According to Dedej, there are some 2 million Bektashis in Turkey and Erkula is of Bektashi heritage. Erkula made a personal visit to the Bektashi world headquarters and later arranged for the Turkish Minister of Culture to visit the Bektashi World Congress in December ¶2005. Dedej said that although Bardhi had visited Turkey unofficially three times in the past, this would be his first official visit as the head of the World Bektashi organization. The Bektashis have accepted the invitation, in principle, and the two sides are working together to finalize the details of the visit.

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